False Dichotomies and Other Barriers to Policy-Making for Aboriginal Communities

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The Boomali Aboriginal Artist's Cooperative was established in 1987 and it has launched the career of artists such as Fiona Foley, Bronwyn Bancroft, Destiny Deacon, Michael Riley, Gordon Hookey, Harry Wedge, Hettie Perkins and Brenda Croft. These artists, though diverse in style, all embody an urban Indigenous sensitivity. Today, it has over 70 artists as members.

Bancroft's work is an example of the use of symbols and storytelling mixed with contemporary issues such as identity, removal of children and the danger of HIV/AIDS. Her work is vibrant in colour, using moving away from the ochre colours that still predominate what is perceived as 'traditional art'. Croft's photography captures slices of urban Aboriginal families, highlighting kinship ties, family bonds and social interconnectedness. Gordon Hookey makes highly political art with word plays such as 'terror nullius' and images of judges with pigs faces and John Howard with a snout, all with their necks glowing red. 'Boomalli' means to strike or to make a mark in the languages of the Bundjalung, Gamilaroi and Wiradjeri – three nations within the borders of New South Wales and the artists within the co-operative state that they are committed to ensuring that the wider Australian community sees Aboriginal culture as 'a living, breathing, evolving culture.'

Over the last year, Federal government funding for Boomali has been cut from $254 000 from federal government in 2003-4 to $100 000 in 2004-5. This decrease in funding was a result of a new funding formula that was devised by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services (ATSIS) that favoured art organisation in remote communities. With a 60 percent decrease, the co-operative has struggled to find ways to remain viable. The challenges facing of Boomali is a snapshot of the impact of the increasing focus on remote communities in the implementation of policy.

I. The Measure of Need

This focus on remote communities has been driven by the findings of the Commonwealth Grants Commission's 2001 *Report on Indigenous Funding*.[2] The report identified areas of relative need and found that those areas were predominantly in remote areas. No-one would quibble about the need of remote communities, especially those who have seen the disadvantage and social problems up close.

But when one sees the impact of the diversion of Aboriginal money on organisations like Boomali, the assumptions that underpin this policy approach need to be carefully analysed. In relation to the Commonwealth Grants Commission report, the following points need to be made:

- Some of the Commissioners themselves were unhappy with this as a measure of 'need' and thought that it would have been better to analyse disadvantage in terms of absolute need rather than relative need. That is, while the report focused on where the greatest need was so that limited resources could be shifted there, it was believed that the correct process should have been to asses the needs of everyone; and,
- That there was need identified in rural and urban communities across Australia as well.

The Federal government estimates that about 120 000 Aboriginal people live in remote communities. Current estimates of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community would mean that remote communities would make up about one-quarter of the Indigenous population. This leaves out communities in Walgett, Redfern, Framlingham, Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney. When looking at the poverty in areas like Mount Druitt and the Redfern Block and in looking at the range of socio-economic issues that face those communities, a policy that states that these are issues just as easily

tackled by mainstreaming – as opposed to targeted – policy and program delivery is not convincing.

While it is perhaps easier politically to gather support from the broader Australian community for dealing with problems in Aboriginal communities where the population looks more like 'real' Aborigines, it is irresponsible – and in the end, bad policy – to ignore the other 76 percent of the Aboriginal community.

Australian Bureau of Statistics data consistently holds that these communities – whether urban, rural or remote – all suffer from lower education, higher unemployment, poorer housing and poorer health than all other Australians.

- In 2002-2003, the hospitalisation of Indigenous children aged four years and under for infectious diseases (111 per 1000) was more than double the rate for non-Indigenous children.
- Infant mortality rate in the same period for Indigenous babies was two to three times that of non-Indigenous babies.
- The proportion of live births during 1999-2001 with low birth weight was almost twice as high for Indigenous than for non-Indigenous mothers.
- In 2001-2002, influenza and pheumonia (114.5 per 1000), followed by bacterial disease (62.7 per 1000) and intestinal infectious diseases (58.2 per 1000) accounted for most hospital admissions. Respectively, these are rates four, two and a half and three times as high as the non-Indigenous community.
- Indigenous students have a tendency to leave school once they reach the age when attendance is no longer compulsory.
- Non-Indigenous students are twice as likely to continue to Year 12 as Indigenous students.
- In2002, 42 per cent of Indigenous people aged 18-24 years were neither studying nor employed or in the labour force, compared with 13 per cent of other Australians.
- During 1999-2001, homicides, as a proportion of total deaths, were far greater in the Indigenous population – 2.1 per cent compared with 0.2 per cent in the non-Indigenous population.
- Indigenous people were much more likely to be victims of murder, assault, sexual assault and domestic violence than non-Aboriginal people.
- Indigenous people were sometimes 15 times more likely than non-Aboriginal people to be in prison.
- Despite a decline overall of the number of Indigenous juveniles in prison, they were still 19 times more likely to be detained than a non-Aboriginal person.

(Productivity Commission, Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2003 and 2005)

Statistics like these do not differentiate between jurisdiction though will occasionally note a higher rate of incidence in remote communities (such as for dental health).

However, analysis of jurisdictions also highlights 'need' in Indigenous communities when compared to non-Indigenous indicators and can also show particular trends in each state. For example, New South Wales has seen the over-representation increase at a higher rate than any other jurisdiction, especially for women and juveniles.

- Workforce participation rates for Indigenous people in urban NSW are 81.2 percent compared to 93 percent of non-Indigenous people;
- Housing-related poverty is most acute in highly populated areas and Coffs Harbour and Sydney are the areas (along with Brisbane) that have the highest number of households affected by housing poverty;
- In NSW, the life expectancy of Aboriginal men is 20 years less than that of non-Aboriginal men; for Aboriginal women, it is 19 years less than for non-Aboriginal women.
- Home ownership in urban areas is 38.5 percent for Indigenous people compared to 65.9 percent for non-Indigenous people.
- In New South Wales, Aboriginal people are 3.7 times more likely to be the victim of a violent offence and 2.6 times more likely to be the victim of a sexual offence.

(Commonwealth Grants Commission; BOSCAR)

The failure to target socio-economic issues in urban and rural centres leads to increased social problems and criminal activity. *Speak Out Speak Strong* (Lowrie 2003) was a report commissioned by the Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee. It interviewed Indigenous women offenders. It found that 31 percent of all women in prison are Indigenous, they are predominantly young (average age 25), have low levels of education and high levels of unemployment. 60 percent of the survey had been convicted of a serious offence and 36 percent had their first convictions between the ages of 11 and 12. 98 percent of the offenders had prior convictions as adults; 26 percent had between 15 to 30 previous convictions and 75 percent had been incarcerated previously. Most were single mothers with between two to four children of which they had the primary care. They were often also responsible for other, non-biological children and for older relatives.

Sixty-eight percent of the women surveyed were on drugs at the time of the offence, 14 percent were under the influence of alcohol. One third of them said they were heroin users. 70 percent of the women had been sexually abused as children, 78 percent had been victims of violence as adults and 44 percent had been sexually assaulted as adults.

This snapshot starts to reveal a number of themes. There are the indicators of cyclical poverty (low levels of education, high levels of unemployment), the use of drugs and alcohol, recidivism and institutionalism, and cycles of abuse. One revealing piece of data was that 98 percent of those who said they were sexually assaulted as children also had a drug problem. The study identified a clear link between child sexual abuse, drug addiction and offending behaviour. The evidence of how many children and extended family members are supported by incarcerated women starts to give a glimpse of the impact of imprisonment of Indigenous women on Indigenous families.

Indigenous women are the largest rising prisoner population in the world. There are a higher number of Indigenous women on remand, which increases the numbers of Aboriginal women in prison. On 30 June 2002, there were 367 Indigenous females and 1094 non-Indigenous females in prison; this is a rate of 285 Indigenous females and 14 non-Indigenous females per relevant population. New South Wales had the highest imprisonment rate. These figures reflect an increase in a wide variety of offences, particularly those such as offences against the person that attract custodial sentences. Aboriginal people are less likely to get bail and, when bail is granted, seem to be more likely to breach condition attached. This has a serious implication: three times more deaths in custody occur amongst remand prisoners. The AJAC study showed that of the 30 percent of women who had been granted bail at some stage, 67 percent said that they had previously breached bail conditions for a broad range of reasons, including failure to notify of change of address, failure to report to police/parole officer, failure to attend weekend detention and failure to complete drug rehabilitation. The study found that in many cases, Aboriginal women were not expecting to gain bail; they were expecting a prison sentence.

If there is evidence that there are elements to criminality that relate to socio-economic status, the solutions to reducing the over-representation of Indigenous women as offenders relate to breaking the cycle of poverty and the cycles of violence. 92 percent of respondents on the AJAC survey said they were not employed at the time they committed their offence. Only 52 percent of those who were unemployed said they were receiving benefits from Centrelink. 42 percent said that they had never received any benefits at all. This survey showed that 43 percent of the participants who had dependant children did not receive an income from employment or Centrelink payments. Approximately 70 percent of the surveyed participants said they were stay-at-home mothers. 13 percent said that their income was from drug dealing. According to the AJAC survey, one quarter of Aboriginal women in custody have relied on crime to support themselves and family members.

Any overarching policy that fails to deal with the particular needs of urban/rural Aboriginal communities will fail to address the underlying causes of socio-economic inequality and will fail to effectively reduce the national disparity between the living standards of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. This policy focus on the 'most needy' of communities is driven by the under-resourcing of the Indigenous sector despite the fact that the dollar amounts spent by the Federal Government on Indigenous initiatives has been increasing (see Fig.1).

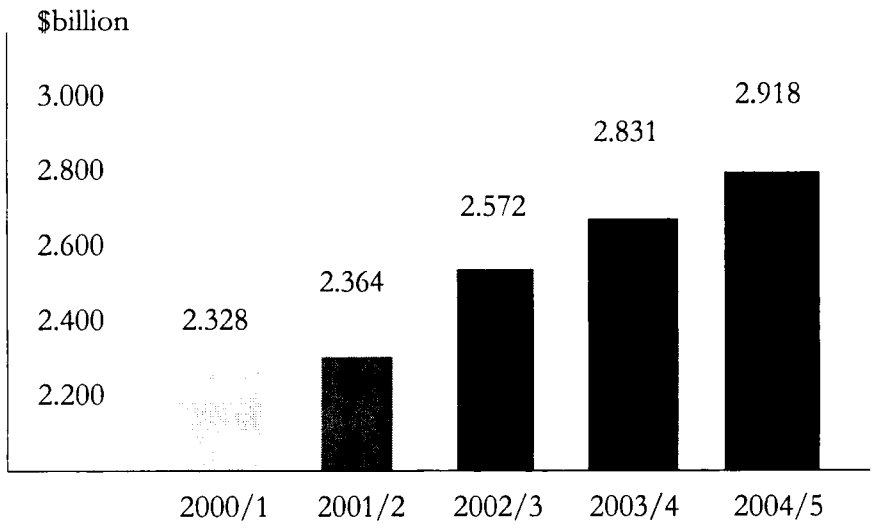


Figure 1. Identifiable Commonwealth Expenditure on Indigenous Affairs – All Commonwealth Departments

However, research on health needs indicate that these increases in Federal funding are inadequate. During the free-spending promises of the election from both major parties, there was no increase in funding to Aboriginal health. The Australian Medical Association, in a report titled *Expenditures on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health*[3], estimated that Indigenous health needs were under-funded by $452.5 million a year. When it is remembered that over $60 billion is spent on health by governments each year, this under-funding would require less than a 1 percent increase in that spending. As Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation have noted, the Federal budget for 2004/2005 allocated only an additional $10million for primary health care, 40 times less than what was needed.

What this indicates is that the overall spending on Indigenous issues should be better targeted and increased to meet Indigenous needs. And that need should not be measured by where the more needy Aboriginal communities are by comparison with other Aboriginal communities but where that need exists in relation to non-Aboriginal communities.

II. Old Style Mainstreaming

The policy of diverting resources from urban/rural to rural/remote communities is also underpinned by the ideology of mainstreaming and the belief that communities in urban areas in particular, should be serviced by mainstream organisations. The danger with the move is that policies of 'mainstreaming' has failed in the past to shift the poorer health, lower levels of education, higher levels of unemployment and poorer standard of housing that Aboriginal communities have experienced and has not offered ways to protect Aboriginal cultural heritage, interest in land, language. To date, they have not offered a way in which Aboriginal people can play the central role in making decisions that will impact on their families and communities.

In the past, the failure of mainstreaming has stemmed from its inability to target specific issues that arise in Aboriginal communities in relation to health, education, housing and employment. This is because mainstream services need to develop specific mechanisms and strategies for Aboriginal clients and they have to do this with stretched resources. In addition to these challenges, Aboriginal people claim that they are often subjected to racism within those mainstream services. Those claims of racism, particularly in relation to the delivery of health services, were well documented in the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and in particular the case of Arthur Moffitt who was found on a train and taken to the police lock-up because he was assumed to be drunk; he was actually suffering from a hyperglycaemic episode and he died in custody.

The reversion back to mainstreaming is occurring without any changes to the following limitations to visionary policy-making:

- The focus on projects rather than programs means that policy makers are primarily engaged with the delivery of project funding rather than developmental programs that invest in people, that is, they focus on the short term, not the long term.
- The project mantra is premised on the belief that a desired outcome can be engineered by the implementation of a series of projects focussed on addressing the symptoms not the causes;
- The focus on projects fits easily within budget cycles whereas longer term structural programs require funding commitments into future funding cycles. The focus on project funding means that organisations are unsure as to their future viability; and
- Policy focuses on achievements within the political cycle that will create good news stories and do not look beyond the current political term.
- It equates accounting with accountability and progress with funds disbursement, a focus on money without a complimentary focus on outcomes.

This policy environment generates anxiety within community organisations who are focussed on ensuring the continuity or continuance of funding (reporting, accounting and submission at hand) at the expense of a focus on their core business. Funding of organisations frequently occurs at the level deemed to be required and while this is understandable when the reality is that resources are limited and demand is exponential, but this minimal funding means that, at the coal face, organisations are expected to deliver champagne on a lemonade budget.

To understand what I need to convey, the following analogy may be useful. It is this project mantra and its limiting corollaries which must be rejected as the predominant approach to the delivery of policy and programs. This means focusing on a longer term vision of change that will empower and sustain Indigenous communities.

III. Unhooking the 'Either/Or'

From the very beginning of his Prime Ministership, John Howard distanced his government from the broad vision of reconciliation. He rejected the notion of rights, the notion of self-determination and stated that his government's approach to Aboriginal policy would be one he labelled 'practical reconciliation'. With seductive political rhetoric, Howard stated that this policy would focus on the issues that were most important to Aboriginal people – health, housing, education and employment. The government claimed that its commitment to these issues would be shown by its commitment to greater funding for what it referred to as 'Indigenous specific programs'. But like most seductive political rhetoric, 'practical reconciliation' needed closer scrutiny.

But there are some fundamental problems with this approach, not the least being that the Howard governments approach continues to marginalise the rights agenda. It denigrates as 'elite' and 'out-of-touch' those who seek to invoke the principles of human rights and who use the language of self-determination. This has been a devise that has appealed to the anti-intellectualism that is too prevalent in Australian society and it is a sly way to silence advocates for Aboriginal people who usually employ the rhetoric of rights to explain the claims and aspiration of Aboriginal people, their families and their communities – the claim for native title rights, the desire to engage with the economy, the right to enjoy language and culture, the right to a family. Every one interested in bettering the position of Aboriginal people in Australia would also highlight the importance of health, education, housing and employment as key socio-economic matters to be addressed.

This rights rhetoric has the intention of making real changes to the lives of Aboriginal people, namely, their access to education, their employment opportunities, their standard of living (including housing) and improving their health. Rights are entitlements and they are a call for structural change, for an evening out of the playing field. But they are only relevant if we remember their importance to our everyday lives.

The plethora of issues that face Aboriginal Australia will require a more sophisticated approach than simply targeting problem areas with policy and a more sophisticated approach than simply relying

on the rhetoric of rights. The false either/or dichotomy of policy and rights fails to appreciate the link between the need for effective policy and the need to protect the inherent rights of Aboriginal people from violation. The false division between the socio-economic issues – family violence, substance abuse, socio-economic disparity – and the rights agenda is unhelpful as it places one strategy in competition with the other.

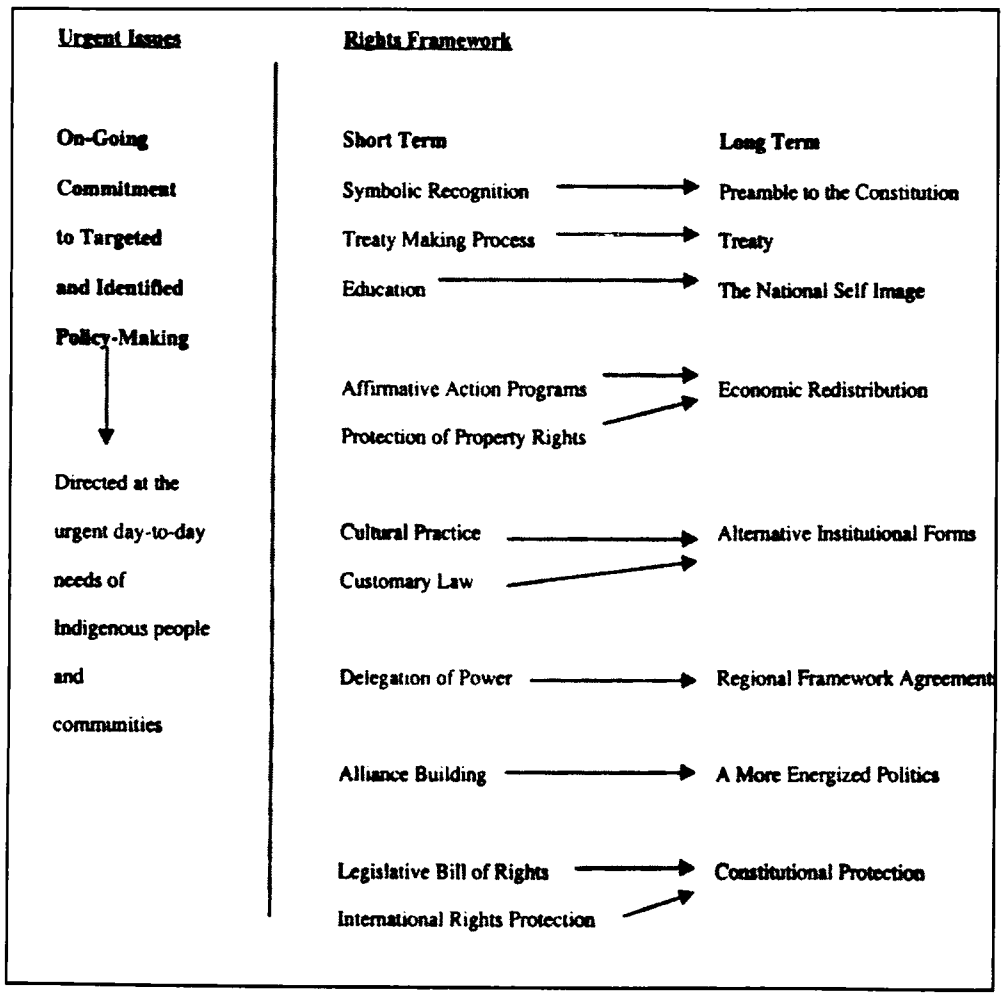
Instead of being seen as an either/or, the relationship between policy making and rights protection should be viewed as a trajectory with policy initiatives at one end and structural changes on the other. Policies will only help to achieve long-term change if they work towards a broader and systemic vision of change at the same time as they target inequality and can identify problems in the short term. Similarly, long-term strategies are ineffective unless he strategy for achieving them includes considered and targeted policy.

Roberto Mangabiera Unger, the world-renown critical legal scholar, wrote:

> It is true that we cannot become visionaries until we become realists. It is also true that to become realists we must make ourselves into visionaries. (Unger 1996)

It is this mix of pragmatism and forward vision that needs to unite in approach to Aboriginal issues and is reflected in an approach that mixes reactive policy with proactive and prevention focused policy. This can be achieved by developing a broader vision of aspirations for the Aboriginal community and matching policy initiatives to that broader, long-term agenda. Below is the example of this exercise undertaken in *Achieving Social Justice* (Behrendt 2003) using vision statements by various Aboriginal leaders (such as Patrick Dodson and Peter Yu) and various community statements (the Barunga statement and the Eva valley statement). That is, it is a model that used an Indigenous vision of a reconciled Australia for its aspirations.

One of the key challenges to the delivery of health and education in particular is that they are areas in which responsibility is shared between federal and state/territory governments. There was one



initiative by the Howard government that promises to shed some light on the cost shifting between governments and the poor communication and co-ordination between government departments at both levels.

This promise was held in the Council of Australian Government trials in seven Aboriginal communities that sought to experiment with what would be a 'new' and co-ordinated, whole-of-government approach to service delivery. Unfortunately, these trials have yet to be thoroughly evaluated and information on them is hard to obtain. They are important because, whether they succeed or fail, they will provide insights into a co-ordinated approach to service delivery and this could, if used honestly, openly and properly, provide the basis for research-based policy – and that would be a 'new' approach to policy making for Aboriginal communities.

IV. Using more than just a Measure of Misery

Decision making on funding allocations based on relative need fosters a mentality where people seek to project a monopoly of suffering with communities having to create an impression of impoverishment to secure resources. Alternative policy approaches can also be developed through the investigation of indicators of success in existing Aboriginal organisations.

There is much fascination with the work of the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development.[4] Fascination with and reliance on the Harvard project is due to both our natural curiosity of other jurisdictions but also because of too little study in Indigenous communities and organisations in Australia. The key principles identified by the Harvard project that led to successful models of Indian governance are as follows:

- Stable political institutions and policies
- A judicial system independent of political influence
- Firewalls between the management of enterprises and Tribal Councils
- Competent, professional bureaucracies
- Governing institutions to reflect cultural traditions

However, there are some key structural differences in the United States and Australian contexts that need to be remembered as they impact on the Harvard Projects applicability to the situation here. The constitutional law of the United States recognises a limited Indian jurisdiction in their status as 'domestic dependent nations'. This means that they have opportunities for economic development in relation to tax-exempt status and the ability to engage in gambling. It also means that Indian Nations are able to establish their own Tribal Court systems with limited jurisdiction. There is no such recognition of the status and jurisdiction of Aboriginal nations in Australia. In addition, Indian tribes in the United States have an interest in the natural resources on their tribal lands. This is an economic resource that has generated wealth for some Indian communities in the United States which has no equivalent in Australia.

However, some of the findings of the Harvard Project research reinforce principles that have been found to exist in Aboriginal organisations that have been the object of other studies in Australia on the elements that lead to success in Aboriginal communities. These studies have identified the following elements as contributing to effective governance:

- A strong link between internal and external accountability.
- Capacity Building within the Aboriginal Community
- Intercultural forms of Governance
- The Need for Engagement
- Integrated Governance Structures

More relevant studies focus on the elements that have achieved 'success' in the Australian context. A first stage study undertaken by Australian Collaborations with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies with Julie Finlayson as the chief investigator is an example of this much-needed work (Finlayson 2004). That study looked at two community organisations: Wangka Maya Language Centre in the Pilbara and the Durri Medical Service in Kempsey. It came to the following conclusions as to what factors led to success in Aboriginal community organisations:

The Australian Collaborations study, on the basis of these two pilot projects, identified the following critical factors:

- The use of planning tools (for example a strategic plan and a marketing plan).
- Accountability, both internal accountability (such as ensuring communication between management and staff and adherence by all to Occupational Health and Safety, set hours of work, and time keeping) and external accountability (for example, in grant acquittal, timely production of annual reports, compliance with the regulator, regular reports to clients and corporation members.
- A preparedness to constantly and consistently monitor, review, and adjust operations for improved performance and results and an appreciation that funding bodies rely on performance data and outcomes to continue funding programs.
- Flexibility in employment options. But these must be underpinned by a commitment to professionalism in the conduct and performance of work.
- The valuing of staff through encouragement and support for professional development. Provision of career paths within the organisation at all levels of work.
- Respect for staff needs in the light of workplace and family demands.
- Developing pride and confidence amongst Aboriginal staff and clients and empowerment through outcomes consistently achieved.
- Understanding that a service to the Indigenous community occurs in a wider socio-economic and political context and seeing ways to imbed the service into a framework of community development.
- In rural and remote sectors, successful Indigenous organisations often require cutting edge and lateral thinking and problem solving. It is the limitations of their location and the lack of social infrastructure that provides opportunities to think outside the square when problem solving.
- Successful organisations know what business they are in and what they do best. They do not expand simply for the sake of it. Both case studies were examples of organisations operating in niche contexts that have focused on developing best practice in service provision and organisational development.
- Successful organisations survive change. They also survive changes in leadership. This is an important factor in the Indigenous organisation since employees can become attached to the idea that there is only one individual with the right background, power, charisma or family connections who can five the organisation credibility and status.

It is evident from these characteristics that have been identified that there is a need for investment in organisations to ensure the development of capacity and security in order to develop skill-sets in staff and to ensure staff development. It is also clear that successful organisations, according to the quantitative study, have to be able to navigate and understand reporting and other funding requirements.

V. Conclusions

In policy making for Aboriginal people, the false dichotomy of 'either' policy 'or' rights has to be rejected and with it the focus on the 'project mantra'. Instead, policy making is most effective if it is a mix of targeted, reactive initiatives and strategic, structural changes. This mixed strategy will also assist in overcoming the barriers to long term policy that are posed by the funding cycle and the political cycle.

The other false distinction that must be rejected to ensure a more effective overall approach to Indigenous policy is to reject the notion of 'relative need' in favour of 'absolute need' when developing policy priorities. This shift in focus will be all the more important if the government continues to mainstream Indigenous services.

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Endnotes

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[2] Commonwealth Grants Commission. *Report on Indigenous Funding.* Canberra, 2001. The report can be downloaded from www.cgc.gov.au.

[3] The economic data in the report was commissioned from Access Economics. The report is available at www.ama.com.au/web.nsf/doc/WEEN-5N626Y.

[4] Information on the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development can be found at www.ksg.harvard.edu/ hpaied/overview.htm

INTRODUCTION

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Background

Australia's Indigenous citizens live in a wide variety of circumstances across both rural and urban Australia. Increasingly, their location is an urban and peri-urban one. Nonetheless, rural and remote Aborigines comprise a sizable number, around 120,000 in an Indigenous population of 460,000. Many reside on their countries and many have received land rights in the past 25 years. For most, engagement with a cash economy has been quite recent and brought with it expanding institutional links beyond an immediate locale. Made 'remote' because their regions lack interest for the national economy, or because previous rural industries have waned, these Australian citizens are confronted with the dual challenge of cultural difference and rapid change[1]. These changes include population growth within communities that have relatively little net out-migration.

This circumstance embodies an explosive situation in which young people pass from youth to adulthood in increasingly large cohorts with little education and few job prospects. Employment growth in remote communities has been mainly in areas of administration and other service jobs. This circumstance advantages the better educated, including Indigenous people drawn from cities and regional towns. It has impact especially on unskilled youth in remote communities. Despite some variation between the positions of women and men, the overall situation fuels tense family and gender relations. Domestic and community violence is common. Poor health is widespread and perennial. For most young adults, 'make work' and welfare policies have been unable to support desired levels of well-being. Moreover, this circumstance can also obscure the relevance of literate education when avenues for using education and trade skills are reduced in a limited labour market. As a consequence, both children and parents struggle to maintain education a priority.

These conditions became the topic of debate in a range of mainstream publications that began with Dr. Noel Pearson's *Our Right to Take Responsibility* (2000). His work and that of others has focused on the issues of welfare, demoralisation in communities and extreme poverty. Pearson has pointed to the need and desire for more enterprise in communities where the current policies of government welfare transfers have not produced the types of results that many hoped for.

These issues have been interpreted in terms of the relative merits of economic development and land rights. Yet the particular cast that the Federal Government placed on this – as an issue of 'practical' versus 'symbolic' reconciliation – is not the only one. Another and more popular view is that both are integral to Indigenous well-being in rural and remote communities. Equally, if land rights have promoted living remote, it is crucial that the resource and human capital implications of this circumstance be addressed. While economists often lack the knowledge of culture that would allow them to factor in relevant costs of lifestyle change among Aborigines, anthropologists familiar with Indigenous culture often overlook the resource issues that are central to community life.

These limitations among professionals point to a more general feature of this public debate: the relative lack of information concerning rural and remote Aborigines: their histories, past and present engagements with the Australian economy, along with the cultural commitments they retain. Too often churchmen have attributed Indigenous poverty and demoralization to individual weakness, while some policy advisors are unwilling to grant that migration has enormous costs for many Aborigines. At the same time, some anthropologists and philosophers have treated these issues as lacking relevance to a politics of difference. Their emphasis on the reproduction of culture has meant

that often little attention is paid to the concomitant costs. Yet life-long welfare dependency affects Indigenous Australians just as much as it does non-Indigenous Australians. It undermines local authority, material well being and social-moral coherence. No modern society and culture can flourish in conditions of declining literacy, unemployment, poor health, poor housing, and community and domestic violence.

The workshop from which this collection comes was devised with these issues in mind. It brought together 22 participants in five panels scheduled across two days. It was sponsored jointly by the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia, and the Anthropology Department at the University of Sydney. The participants convened at Sydney University on 3-4 December 2004 but planning had commenced almost a year before.

Planning the Workshop

When we first planned the workshop our aim was to bring together anthropologists and economists. We thought that this would promote acknowledgment, on the one hand, of the specificity of Aboriginal people and, on the other, of the intractability of modern society that makes labour, capital and commodity markets central to all populations – even those still engaged partly in hunter-gather life. In short, our focus was on culture and economy and this was intended to signal two significant shifts. The first was a shift away from land rights as the overarching theme in university research. Land rights and its legal process have dominated a range of disciplinary concerns for at least two decades. With the conclusion of claims under the *Northern Territory Aboriginal Land Rights Act*, and a slower pace for Native Title, it seemed right to take up other pressing and related issues. A second shift concerned a recent prominence in academic and policy debate on issues of governance. This prominence has been influenced by two factors. One is that government transfers now constitute a large part of the local economies of Aboriginal people. The other is that the development of an Indigenous administrative sector has been seen as the centrepiece in struggles for Indigenous rights. A common view has been that cultural reproduction and self-management go together. Built into this position has been the assumption that this will be self-management mainly of government transfers supporting Aboriginal milieux.

Such research tends to take as given that most remote Indigenous Australians will stay welfare dependent, that their chief source of income will remain government transfers. Notwithstanding current rhetoric in the political domain, this assumption is well founded. The economic outlook for rural and remote Indigenous communities is bleak. Yet a focus on governance alone cannot address what should be the central issue: namely, that many Indigenous Australians wish to remain remote even though governments, state and federal, do not favor job creation in these areas. The consensus of the Australian majority seems to be that, notwithstanding their historical dispossession, rural and remote Indigenous Australians do not warrant special treatment in the area of industry support for jobs. The consequence is that many Aborigines continue to live remote, but in demoralised and disadvantaged conditions. If in fact government transfers are not enough, if life-long welfare is inherently disabling even on the margins of the nation state, improving governance can only have a limited impact.

The implications of this fact are often placed in stark relief: either Aboriginal people will favor culture and remain remote and impoverished, *or* they will need to migrate and forego that culture. A variety of views seek ways out of this dilemma. Some writers propose that traditional culture can meet the demands of current community life – by re-locating in small outstation groups, or by fostering various forms of land care economy. Others envisage community-funded enterprise based on government transfers and modest private investment. Still others advocate migration with the assumption that the cultural adjustments involved could not be worse than the current disabling impact of violence, poor education and health in remote communities.

It was debate around these issues that we hoped the workshop would produce. In particular, we aimed to provide some economists with a better understanding of how attachments to country and kin can create daunting costs that inhibit the desire to migrate. We also hoped that the workshop would reveal some significant gaps in anthropology's research. Can a focus on governance alone address the

issues of violence, poor health and deteriorating literacy? What is the impact of marginality on culture and in what ways is culture disarranged? Can it be the case that communitarian commitments actually violate individual rights? Two related factors dampened our ambitions. First, we found it very difficult to recruit economists to the workshop who had any experience of or sustained interest in remote Indigenous communities. In areas of economics relevant to policy it seemed to matter that Aborigines are a small and little known sector of the electorate. In addition, we found a polarised professional community in which it was commonly assumed that economics and anthropology simply could not communicate. Second, among anthropologists not focused on traditional culture and fine art, many worked on governance and seemed to accept the status quo of communities resourced mainly through government transfers. Not to adopt their position was construed by some as tantamount to the betrayal of self-management and even Aboriginal culture itself. Sometimes the assumption was that suffering in communities is exaggerated in order to undermine Indigenous governance. In short, bounded fields and gaps in research reflected a society in which Aboriginal issues have been allowed to slide on and off the agenda for generations. As this situation persists, Aborigines suffer like no other Australians.

Our original intention had been a workshop on 'Economy and Culture in Aboriginal Australia'. This collection is entitled 'Economy, Culture and Governance'. It reflects the fact that governance and self-management are critical to Indigenous Australians just because their fates are so directly tied to government administration. Because this is the case, and because they are also a tiny electoral minority, Indigenous Australians do need a peak policy body properly funded and independent of political party ideology. Whether or not Indigenous services are administered through mainstream departments, the need for this policy body remains. At the same time, it is our contention that this analytical focus, although important, does not strike at the critical heart of rural and remote Indigenous conditions in Australia. The desire of the continent's original owners to be different if they wish should be canvassed more vigorously. The economic implications of this in a modern society need to be understood. The implications of living in the twilight of life-long welfare, or migration by default, also need to be teased out. Once addressed, these issues should inform the types of options canvassed for Indigenous Australians and the judgments about whether or not they are acceptable ones in a liberal democracy. The papers in this collection make a start on this task.

The Essays

The essays fall into five sections that match the sessions of the workshop. The first, *A History of Initiatives*, reviews Aboriginal engagements with the Australian economy. Peterson provides an overview of Indigenous transitions from small hunter-gatherer groups, to missions and pastoral stations, to the payment of award wages and inclusion in the cash economy. Morphy, Levitus and Trigger in turn discuss art as economy, royalty management, and engagements with the mining sector. The second section, *Indigenous Disadvantage*, provides three overviews of systemic discrimination in education (Mooney), the labour market (Hunter), and in welfare services (Cass). These two sections set the scene: As their lives have changed with incorporation in the Australian nation state, Aboriginal people have sought to engage and have constantly been marginalised.

Section three, *Economic Futures*, is the pivot of the collection. Taylor's essay is a case study of the East Kimberley region and the impacts of possible trajectories for the Argyle Diamond Mine and the Ord River Scheme Stage II proposal. His analysis shows that even with the constructive efforts of Rio Tinto, likely trajectories involve non-Indigenous job loss with major knock-on effects for local Aborigines. Many will be 'structurally detached from the labour market, and ill-equipped to engage it'. Altman's remarks revolve around his model of 'hybrid economy', one in which transfers, and customary and market activity can interact in various ways. A central point for Altman is that stated commitments of government to education and equity are not matched by policy detail. As a consequence, these small, local, managed economies must be addressed as a principal option. Gregory stresses the particularity of remote Indigenous communities: where most people who are marginal

to market activity migrate to other locales, remote Aboriginal people seem to resist this course. In contrast to Altman, he emphasizes that well-being will require increased out-migration because Aborigines, like other Australians, face an 'economy-wide movement' away from demand for full-time, unskilled male labour. Gregory notes the current policy vacuum in areas concerning Indigenous transitions from income support to mainstream employment. Moreover, he is sceptical that remote communities as 'isolated enclaves' dependent mainly on government transfers can provide health and living standards comparable to those of other Australians.

Sections four and five contain papers that discuss community and governance at the local and national levels respectively. *Education and Community Governance* contains four essays. The first two, by Lea and Schwab, in turn consider policy-making in Northern Territory education, and new strategies for integrating schooling into local community life. Smith discusses 'distributed parenting and shared child-care' in the organisation of households. Her discussion underlines that successful schooling needs to be considered in the context of household adaptation. Martin's paper addresses local Indigenous governance. He underlines the intercultural nature of local organisations and proposes that those that address internal accountability also address their external responsibilities more ably.

The final section, *Institutions and Economy*, considers governance nationwide. Sanders discusses the role of difference and different treatment in social security policies. Unlike Gregory, he sees considerable value in the Community Development Employment Project (CDEP), a specifically Indigenous scheme that has brought payments to individuals via community councils that manage work projects. Rowse stresses the importance of an 'Indigenous Sector' compromising several thousand organizations. These organizations, he suggests, are important for their service and political role rather than their maintenance of customary practice. Behrendt takes these ideas further when she argues that rural and urban divides should not detract from a comprehensive commitment to Indigenous good governance. Each of these contributors places an emphasis on Indigenous governance as a crucial pre-condition of well-being.

Some Pivotal Issues

The following seven issues were among the more important that emerged from the workshop. They provide a guide for the reader of the collection, a useful reference point for assessing the essays.

- **Poverty versus Cultural Conundrum:** Are the poor living conditions and often poor administration of remote communities due mainly to economic marginality and poverty or to specific dimensions of Indigenous lives? Some anthropologists argue that Indigenous responses to marginality that involve widespread sharing through networks, rather than individual accumulation, conflict with the values required for small business or for regular workforce participation. Yet is this conundrum different from comparable ones faced by marginalised populations in other parts of the world? Some Indigenous individuals and families do resolve these issues, and in a variety of ways. Understanding that both conflicts and forms of resolution fall within a range provides a more nuanced grasp of Indigenous experience.
- **Customary versus Modern Remoteness:** While it is clear that ritual attachments to country and regional social relations have encouraged many Indigenous Australians to remain remote, it is also the case that resource distribution away from communities and towards outstations has discouraged literate education, employment and out-migration. Lack of social connections and fear of racism in large population centres are further contemporary rather than customary factors bearing on reluctance to migrate either for education or work.
- **Out-migration versus Local Economy:** Though future policy responses to remote Indigenous communities perforce will involve a policy mix – the need for major government transfers will not end soon – different analyses provide different emphases. Altman underlines that a lack of alternatives places the onus on local economies with a major centralised, administrative component (community council, CDEP and so on). On the other hand, Gregory argues that this form of local economy is unlikely to provide levels of health, education and general well-being acceptable for citizens of the nation state. There are numerous dimensions to this focal issue

including the following three:

i) Are local economies sustainable without a major growth in local small business involving incentives both for employers and employees?

ii) Will remote Aboriginal people become savers and consumers without changes in the status of Aboriginal lands that allow long term leases for small businesses and home ownership?

iii) Is out-migration inevitably only one-way? Other marginalised groups elsewhere sustain combinations of one-way and circular migration accompanied by remittances to the home community. ,

- **Human Capital versus Governance:** It is notable that a majority of participants in the Workshop accepted that the economies of remote communities would be administered or command economies. Therefore there were more reflections on good governance than on effective routes to increased human capital for individuals. If the mid- to long-term future for these communities involves government transfers and attention to governance this should not be at the expense of research on and instigation of best-practice strategies in local education. Notwithstanding recent initiatives on the part of Federal and Northern Territory Governments, the hiatus in educational policy and practice remains.
- **Education versus Jobs:** A central issue is whether or not there can be significant improvements in Indigenous education, and the housing, health and family commitment that education requires, without more employment for remote Indigenous people. Continuous employment and the possibilities it opens give schooling meaning, and *vice versa*. While Gregory suggests that more jobs are required for remote Aborigines, he is sceptical that any federal government would be prepared to acknowledge Indigenous difference in this way. Policies that promote remote small business initiatives and contract employment outside communities should be an integral part of achieving better educational outcomes. In these terms, there cannot be a communitarian future without individual futures as well.
- **Local versus National Strategies:** Are the current Federal Government's aspirations to localise Indigenous affairs viable or is a peak policy body required in order to integrate a set of appropriate regional strategies? Does the existence of effective peak Indigenous organisations entail an Indigenous Sector in Rowse's sense? Calls for Indigenous integration rather than assimilation by Aboriginal leaders suggest a properly resourced peak policy group without the cultural and political 'pillarisation'[2] that Rowse seems to favour.
- **Economy versus Culture:** Debates about the relevance or irrelevance of issues of cultural specificity in development are common. Often overlooked in these debates is the issue of the way in which populations *become* specific through the intersection of their regional/cultural circumstance and economic marginality. People draw on their immediate institutional repertoire in order to find viable responses to new conditions. Some of these responses ameliorate emerging pathologies while others exacerbate them. In either case, understanding these responses is crucial to effective Indigenous policy formation in remote communities in Australia.

Endnote

1 Our focus on remote Australia is not to suggest that conditions are worse there than elsewhere in rural or even urban Australia. Indeed, direct comparison between communities is difficult due to their divergent histories and varieties of cultural resource. Nonetheless, Indigenous people who live remote face very specific challenges regarding infrastructure and economic development. Not least among these are the levels and types of support that governments are prepared to provide to small but growing communities.

2 The term 'pillarization' describes plural societies with multiple forms of vertical or parallel integration. Rowse's description of an 'Indigenous sector' suggests this form of institutional integration. Coined initially by economists to describe the Dutch East Indies, the term is now used to describe a variety of plural societies including the Netherlands itself. In anthropology, there are both strong supporters and critics of plural society theory.

Participants in this prestigious Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia workshop were invited on the basis of their national and international reputations and specialist expertise. Papers were pre-circulated so as to generate thorough discussion over the two days of the Workshop. They were then returned to participants for revision, before being subjected to an internal and external editorial process. Although not all papers presented were able to be included in this record of proceedings, the collection represents original, primarily field-based research of significant national importance.

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